



# Meeting the Neighbors

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*Snowy owl over Puget Sound.*

**M**My attention was torn away from the sports page and the Seattle Seahawks by another flock just up the street. The early morning quiet was being shattered by a frantic cacophony of caws, shrieks, and squawks.

The chilly November Monday in 2012 had started with a steaming cup of coffee and the *Seattle Times* while parked on Sunset Avenue in my town of Edmonds, Washington, a perch high above Puget Sound, where I often welcome the day. It had been a sleepy morning until the avian alarm went off. Now fully

awake, I grabbed my Nikon, jumped out of the car, and hurried toward the din.

A block up the street I found the noisy neighbors. A mixed squadron of crows and gulls were dive-bombing the rocky cliff that drops from the road to the beach. Their target on the hillside was a beleaguered bird that was peering over the train tracks below the road. The bird clearly wasn't a local. It had a large white head and piercing yellow eyes like the bald eagles that frequent the waterfront, but any similarity with our na-



**A snowy owl peers over waterfront train tracks.**

tional bird ended there. A black beak and fuzzy white whiskers aren't part of an eagle's outfit.

Although I wasn't yet a bird watcher, I knew the surprise visitor. I'd seen the bird in Harry Potter movies and on the Discovery Channel. I was having a stare down with a snowy owl.

I grabbed my camera and fired off a few shots just before the owl took flight over Puget Sound with a shrieking escort in hot pursuit. I'd just learned my first fundamental bird-watching lesson: Following a frantic flock of crows is a good way to find a raptor.

It wasn't apparent at the time, but this chance encounter—just five minutes from my house—with an Arctic visitor would

inspire me to finally explore my extended backyard after 20 years in the neighborhood. I would also meet my feathered neighbors as new passions for birding and bird photography took flight.

As a fledgling landscape and wildlife photographer, I had recently visited Denali and Yellowstone national parks, and there the focus of my photography had started to develop—mountains, moose, bison, and bears. But not birds. I didn't know a merlin from a merganser and hadn't photographed birds on those trips. The snowy owl would change my focus.

The owl had settled on the nearby marina breakwater, and I quickly drove to the adjacent fishing pier and spent much of



**Expand the mental boundaries of your neighborhood to see more birds.**

the day photographing the magnificent bird. Returning the next morning, I was again treated to a close encounter with the owl. As I walked onto the pier, the bird—spooked by a curious raccoon that popped out of the rocks—took flight directly at me, and I snapped some in-flight shots as the owl streaked by in a banking turn before returning to its perch on the breakwater.

Later, I was astonished to find that I'd spent more than eight hours with the owl over the two days; eight hours that sped by and seemed like an hour. This got me thinking about a problem I'd discovered after my national park visits.

While photographing wildlife at Yellowstone, time stood still like it did during my photo session with the owl. I was hooked.

But when I returned home, I realized that photography trips to iconic wildlife locations wouldn't be frequent. That wouldn't do. I wanted to photograph wildlife on evenings and weekends, not just occasional vacation trips. Maybe birds were the answer.

Snowy owls wouldn't be regular visitors. On the Washington state "Tweeters" birding email list I found only two references to snowy owl visits in Edmonds during the previous seven years. But were there other interesting birds to photograph that lived in or regularly migrated through the area? My time on the local waterfront had been spent eating clam chowder at seafood restaurants, not observing birds, so I had no idea. It was time to meet my feathered neighbors.

I began to scout a long path

that winds through the water-front marina, parks, pier, and jetty and discovered that mallards weren't the only ducks on the bay. I was soon introduced to seabirds with colorful plumage and names like pigeon guillemot, horned grebe, bufflehead, surf and black scoters, harlequin duck, rhinoceros auklet, and marbled murrelet. These water birds became favorite photography subjects, and since many of them winter in Washington, taught me a second core birdwatching lesson: Birds are excellent motivation to get outside during the gloomy, gray, and cold winter months.

My extended backyard also includes the Edmonds Marsh—one of the few remaining urban saltwater estuaries on Puget Sound. The marsh, hidden behind the Harbor Square business park, is the first stop on the Cascade Loop of Audubon Washington's Great Washington State Birding trail ([tinyurl.com/GWSBT](http://tinyurl.com/GWSBT)), and you never know who will glide in at this key stop-over on the Pacific Flyway.

The marsh's boardwalk and viewing platforms became regular stops on my neighborhood photo safaris, and there I've learned to mark the turning of the seasons by new arrivals. Violet-green swallows and red-winged blackbirds mean spring's finally coming, and bald eagles return with autumn's falling

orange leaves and Halloween. Winter brings unusual visitors like a northern shrike or a tree full of red crossbills, and from these birds I learned my third birdwatching fundamental: Visit local birding hotspots frequently to catch travelers that may pass through for just a day or two.

Year-round neighbors at the marsh include a posse of great blue herons that lounge and hunt in the tall grass and cattails. It's a thrill to hear the violent flapping of large wings as a dozen or more herons take flight when flushed by a bald eagle flyover.

I also put feeders in my yard and discovered that I don't have to leave home to meet feathered neighbors. The circle of life was on full display one afternoon when I snapped a photo out the kitchen window of a Cooper's hawk perched on a feeder pole, hoping, no doubt, that lunch would fly into its makeshift fast-food restaurant.

On a spring evening the flock at my backyard barbecue grew by seven when a mother duck and her brood—visitors from a pond a few blocks away—waddled across the lawn behind the patio. I grabbed a camera and snapped photos of the ducklings until I noticed their predicament. They'd found their way into the fenced yard but couldn't remember how to get out. I happily put the camera down and swung the gate

**A Galapagos Island swallow-tailed gull visits Puget Sound.**



open. It's probably my imagination, but I swear the ducks looked nervous as they passed my Weber grill and saw chicken cooking.

Although I never tire of photographing the neighborhood birds and seasonal migrants, rare visitors like the snowy owl that started my birding obsession are always welcome. One such rarity—a swallow-tailed gull—visited in September 2017 and perched on the same marina breakwater as the snowy owl had five years before. Time again stood still as I spent parts of two days photographing a bird that's even rarer in the Pacific Northwest than the snowy owl.

Swallow-tailed gulls breed primarily in the Galapagos Islands, and when they aren't breeding are pelagic, spending their time over the open ocean off the coast of South America. The gull must have had a broken mapping app,

as Edmonds is almost 4,000 miles from the Galapagos. The gull was only the third swallow-tailed gull recorded in North America and the first in Washington.

That off-track gull is the highlight of my birding life list, but my favorite bird photo of tens of thousands I've taken over the past 11 years is the shot of the snowy owl peering over the waterfront train tracks. Without that chance encounter I might never have explored my extended backyard or developed new passions for bird watching and photography. Worse yet, I wouldn't have met a great flock of neighbors. 🦉

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